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ABSTRACT

The lack of licensing laws in most states that would require minimal standards of training and experience for marriage and family therapists make necessary this monograph, which provides consumers with the necessary information to help them find family counseling services that are most appropriate for their needs. Several questions concerning the selection of a qualified marriage and family counselor or therapist are discussed, including an examination of what marriage and family counseling is, why people seek such counseling, how family counseling differs from individual or group psychotherapy, and how to determine whether family therapy is needed. In a section on finding a therapist, a list of general recommendations is followed by discussions on where to look for a therapist, who does marriage and family therapy, what qualifications should be considered, what to ask prior to or during an initial session, and how to avoid charlatans. Several issues and concerns about marriage and family therapy are also addressed, including parenting skills, confidentiality, emotional involvement, goals of counseling, questions asked by therapists, counseling effectiveness, and finding help with sexual problems. Sources of additional information are provided. (NRB)

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A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING AND THERAPY*

by

John W. Engel**

*This paper was presented to the Hawaii Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, in Honolulu, January, 1985. The work was supported by the Hawaii Institute of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources.

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ABSTRACT

To facilitate selection of a qualified marriage and family counselor or therapist, the following questions are discussed: Why do consumers need this information?, Why do people seek marriage and family counseling?, What is marriage and family counseling or therapy?, How does it differ from individual or group psychotherapy?, How do you know if you need a marriage and family therapist?, How can you find a marriage and family therapist?, Who does marriage and family therapy?, What qualifications should you look for in a therapist?, What can you ask a therapist over the telephone or during the first session?, How can you avoid quacks and charlatans?, Is therapy only for "sick" couples and families?, Do you have to be married to seek marriage counseling?, Do therapists or their families also have problems?, Must a therapist experience a given problem in order to help someone else?, Are parenting skills inborn?, Is the goal of marriage counseling always to save the marriage?, What kinds of questions might the therapist ask?, Are therapy sessions confidential?, Do therapists become emotionally involved with their clients?, Is it necessary for both spouses or all family members to attend sessions?, Whose side will the therapist be on?, How effective is marriage and family therapy?, and Can marriage therapists help couples with sexual problems?. Sources of additional information are provided.

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING AND THERAPY

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A CONSUMER'S GUIDE

TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING AND THERAPY

INTRODUCTION

WHY DO CONSUMERS NEED THIS INFORMATION?

In a world and time when nearly half as many divorces occur each year as do marriages, more and more people are seeking help from marriage and family therapists. Some want to improve and others hope to save a marriage or family relationship. Unfortunately, it is not easy to find a competent and qualified marriage and family therapist. Only 9 states (California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Utah) have licensing laws that require and thereby insure minimal standards of training and experience for those who call themselves marriage and family therapists. In other states, there is no marriage and family therapy licensing law to protect the public. Therefore, anyone can hang out a shingle and claim the title of marriage and family therapist. Consumers may not be able to differentiate charlatans from qualified professionals. To protect themselves and obtain services that are appropriate for their needs, consumers need information about marriage and family therapy. They need to know what to look for in selecting a marriage and family therapist, and how to evaluate credentials and weigh

relevant criteria. This monograph provides the necessary information to help consumers find family counseling services that are most appropriate for their unique needs and situations.

To determine what information would be helpful for consumers of marriage and family therapy, the authors interviewed consumers (i.e., "clients"), who had experienced marriage or family therapy, and providers (i.e., therapists) of marriage and family therapy services. Clients were asked to identify questions that they had early in their search for help. Therapists were asked to identify issues and information that they considered important in either the decision to seek help or the selection of an appropriate provider of services. These questions and issues provide the organization for the information that follows.

WHY DO PEOPLE SEEK MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING OR THERAPY?

Usually, people go to a marriage and family therapist for help with some aspect of a family system, or marital, parent-child, or love relationship. In some cases, people want their family system to function more effectively. In other cases, there is a family "problem" which needs solving, a change that requires adjustment, or a difficult decision needs to be made. Sometimes people feel dissatisfied or unhappy with a relationship or merely wish to enrich an already satisfying relationship.

It is not uncommon for a family or love relationship to experience stress related to finances, work, sexuality, in-law

relationships, parenting or child rearing, child behavior and discipline. Other problems such as use of alcohol or other drugs, religious or cultural differences, or illness or death of loved ones are difficult for the average couple or family to resolve. Many couples experience some disenchantment with marriage or parenting, discover role conflicts, feel jealous, or suspect infidelity. There can be differences and disagreements, dissatisfaction with personal fulfillment, unfulfilled emotional needs, or a desire for better communication and interaction.

Many couples may become aware of feelings of unhappiness with their marital or family life style, and need help to identify the problem. Often the couple may know they have a problem. They may have tried many ways to solve it. In such cases, professional guidance can help to explore other problem solving methods. Sometimes a more basic problem underlies the symptoms and prevents the couple or family from solving the difficulty. In many cases, changing the way couples or families communicate and work together leads to solution of the presented problem and prevention of future problems.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELING OR THERAPY?

Marriage and family counseling or therapy is counseling or therapy that focuses on the well-being of primary relationships and systems. In other words, it focuses on love relationships such as pre-marital, marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships, and on larger family systems, which may involve in-laws, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, children or ex-spouses from a previous marriage.

The terms "counseling" and "therapy" are commonly used interchangeably in describing what the marriage and family therapist actually does. The term "counseling" is often used when a strong component of the process is educational, as when parents learn new ways of handling children's behaviors, or when spouses learn better ways of communicating. "Counseling" is probably the most appropriate term to describe the process when the couple or family is basically "healthy" yet seek enrichment of their quality of life together. "Therapy" may be more appropriate when there is a great deal of emotional stress or pain in the relationship or system. Professionals often prefer the term "therapist" to "counselor" as a label, because it includes education functions as well as treatment functions. For the purposes of this discussion, the term "therapist" will be used to mean either counselor or therapist.

HOW DOES MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY DIFFER FROM INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY?

Marriage and family therapy differs from individual psychotherapy in focus and process. It focuses primarily on couple or family relationships and systems, and only secondarily on individuals. In contrast, traditional individual psychotherapy focuses on individual mental health primarily, and family relationships secondarily. The process of marriage and family therapy tends to involve facilitation of communication between family members. In contrast, the process of traditional psychotherapy tends to involve more interaction between client and therapist.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU NEED A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST?

There is no simple formula that will tell you when to see a therapist. In general, many love relationships or family systems could benefit from enrichment through professional counseling. When there are problems in a love relationship or family system, it is wise to seek professional help as soon as possible. Therapy need not be a last-ditch remedy. Some couples or families wait too long before getting help; the problem gets worse and becomes more difficult to solve. Nevertheless, it is never too late to make constructive changes in a marriage or family, as long as there is

still some love and motivation to work things out.

Sometimes stress or pain in the family becomes so severe that the involved individuals cannot function effectively in their work or in school. It may be obvious to others that some outside help is needed. Sometimes a school counselor or supervisor at work will recommend counseling. Nevertheless, much of the time, family members, even those directly involved, are unaware of the severity of the problem and of the need for outside help.

To increase awareness of distress in a love relationship, Dr. David Olson, Professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, recommends asking the following questions:

1. Do you frequently find fault with your partner?
2. Do you often think about ways you want to change your partner?
3. Do you often wish you had not gotten married?
4. Do you find yourself more withdrawn from your spouse and more drawn into yourself?
5. Do you experience depression, tension, or headaches from worrying about your marriage?
6. Have you or your partner been drinking or taking more drugs recently?
7. Do you feel your disagreements never get resolved and come up again and again?
8. Do you continually argue over minor issues?
9. Are you afraid to express your anger or frustration?
10. Do your children take sides with your partner against

you or vice versa?

11. Has your sexual relationship become a problem?
12. Are you becoming emotionally or socially involved with another person?

Similarly, the following questions may facilitate increased awareness of distress in a family system:

1. Are there repeated requests for or continued use of tranquilizers, energizers or sleeping aids? Is use of alcohol sometimes "excessive?"
2. Are there repeated complaints of "unexplainable" fatigue?
3. Are conversations about a lover, spouse, child, parent, etc., stressful?
4. Are there concerns regarding the behaviors of a spouse or child?
5. Are feelings of loneliness, isolation, moodiness, or depression evident?
6. Is there evidence of unexplained physical injuries to spouse, child, or parent?
7. Is there a pattern of behavior that is inappropriate for the child's (or sometimes adult's) age?
8. Is there a pattern of self destructive behavior (e.g., verbal self-deprecation, abuse of food/drugs, attempted suicide, etc.)?
9. Does a child have learning difficulties or school problems that have no physical or intellectual basis?
10. Does anyone have an illness that has no physical basis?

11. Does a child run away, break laws, or otherwise become involved in the juvenile justice system?

12. Do problems persist?

While the above questions can signal distress in a relationship or system, it would be much better if such problems could be prevented. Couples or families without obvious problems may want to go to a therapist for enrichment of relationships and strengthening of systems, which could prevent many problems from developing.

FINDING A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST

WHAT ARE SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS?

1. Shop around. Ask for referrals and recommendations.
2. Look for the most qualified professional you can find.
3. Look for a professional whose personality and values are compatible with your own values.
4. "Interview" prospective service providers to determine how well they can meet your needs.

WHERE CAN YOU LOOK FOR A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST?

Friends or relatives who have benefited from counseling in the past may be able to help in the search for a marriage and family therapist. A minister, priest, rabbi, family physician, or other professional may provide a referral to a therapist. The local mental health association or information and referral service may also be helpful. Professional organizations such as the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) and the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT), also make referrals or provide a list of therapists who practice in specified geographical areas (Addresses of selected professional organizations are provided in a later section). Community mental health centers and family service agencies may offer marriage and

family counseling services. Therapists in private practice typically list their services in the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory under "Marriage Counselors" or "Family Therapists."

WHO DOES MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY?

Consumers are sometimes bewildered by the variety of professions that offer services to individuals, couples and families. Besides marriage and family therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, and other kinds of counselors also may offer counseling or therapy services to couples and families. Complicating matters, some professionals are qualified in more than one discipline, e.g., in both marriage/family therapy and psychology.

Marriage and family therapists may have a masters or doctorate degree in marriage and family therapy or family science, or they may have a graduate degree in some other allied profession, such as psychology, medicine, social work, or home economics, and specialized training in marriage and family therapy.

WHAT QUALIFICATIONS SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST?

In the states where marriage and family therapists are licensed, consumers may rely on government regulating agencies to insure minimal standards of training and experience. However in most states there is no marriage and family therapy licensure law to

protect the public. Anyone can hang up a shingle and claim to be a marriage and family therapist. In either case, wise consumers will shop around and do their own evaluation of relevant criteria to find the most qualified or otherwise appropriate therapist available. In states where marriage and family therapists are not licensed, clinical membership in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy indicates that the therapist has met the minimal requirements of the profession.

The basic qualifications for marriage and family therapists have been established by the primary professional organization in the field. According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, a therapist should have a minimal level of both education, training and experience in marriage and family therapy. Education and training should include completion of a master's or doctoral degree in marital and family therapy from a regionally accredited educational institution, or an equivalent education and degree. In addition, clinical experience should include at least two years of post-degree clinical experience in marriage and family therapy under appropriate supervision.

The therapist's personality and how comfortable you feel with him could be as important a consideration as the therapist's training and experience. Compatibility of therapist and client personalities and values can be important in some cases. One way to test for compatibility is to make an agreement with the therapist for a trial run of some number of sessions (at least three). If you do not feel comfortable with the therapist after this trial period,

you may wish to try another therapist. However, the comfort should be with the therapist's personality rather than with the therapy experience. During therapy, you may often feel uncomfortable, anxious, even angry. There is a temptation to stop therapy when this happens. These emotions, however, can be an indication of progress and an incentive to continue. A skilled therapist will arouse feelings you did not know you had, and will explore these feelings to help reduce the discomfort they arouse.

WHAT CAN YOU ASK A THERAPIST OVER THE TELEPHONE OR DURING THE FIRST SESSION?

It is strongly recommended that you "interview" potential marriage and family service providers to find out how well they can satisfy your needs. A competent and self-confident professional should be glad to answer your questions about qualifications as well as questions about hours and fees. You can ask professionals (or their secretaries) some questions over the telephone, while others should be saved for the first session. Keep in mind that "time is money" for therapists who charge by the hour or session, and that they may have only a few free minutes between sessions for telephone conversations. The following questions should provide relevant information:

1. "Are you a licensed or certified marriage and family therapist?" There may be some confusion in states that have no marriage and family therapy licensing law, when

professionals indicate that they are licensed or certified. You might ask for clarification to determine whether they were licensed or certified in some other state or in some other profession (such as psychology, medicine, or social work). You are advised to check credentials carefully.

2. "Are you a clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT)?" Therapists who have attained "clinical membership status" in AAMFT meet or surpass the training and experience requirements for licensure in states that do have licensure laws. While AAMFT does not normally use the word "certified," "clinical membership in AAMFT" is its equivalent.

3. "What is your educational and training background?" In most cases, the professional will answer this question in terms of graduate degree from some university. The therapist may have a doctorate (e.g., Ph.D., M.D., Ed.D.), or a master's (e.g., M.A., M.S., M.Ed., M.S.W.) degree in marriage and family therapy, or in some allied discipline such as psychology, medicine/psychiatry, social work, or the ministry. If the professional's degree is not in marriage and family therapy per se, you might ask about specialization or additional training in marriage and family therapy or family science. You might also ask about the university which provided the training and degree. This is more important if you have never heard of the university before. Feel free to ask about educational background,

experience, professional affiliation, and special training. You could ask the therapist for a curriculum vita which would provide this information. When the therapist is not licensed or certified by the state or a clinical member of AAMFT, then you need to check credentials carefully.

4. "Have you had experience treating our kind of problem (e.g., communications, sex, child's behavior, etc.)?"
5. "What kind of treatment do you offer or prefer?" Some therapists specialize in specific treatment modalities. Some specialize in a particular "school" of therapy, such as family systems therapy or strategic therapy. Some prefer working with extended families, while others work with nuclear families, couples, parent-child dyads, individuals or groups. Some therapists insist on seeing the whole family together, while others are willing or prefer to work with parts of the family. Typically, decisions regarding treatment or techniques depend upon and follow assessment of the problem, which may take one to several sessions.
6. "How much will it cost?" Community mental health centers, family service agencies, and churches may offer free counseling or charge fees based on family income. Marriage and family therapists in private practice generally charge between $35 and $100 per hour. In some cases, fees are negotiable, given special circumstances. To some extent, charges vary by type of treatment. Group therapy is generally less expensive than couple or family therapy.

Cotherapy (with two therapists, usually one male and one female) usually costs more than if only one therapist is involved.

7. "Is marriage and family therapy covered by insurance?" Marriage and family therapy may be covered by insurance, depending upon diagnosis of the problem.
8. "Where are counseling sessions held?" Sessions are usually held in the therapist's office. However, some professionals are willing to meet clients in the clients' home, school, or elsewhere.
9. "How long will counseling sessions last?" While this can vary, 45 or 50 minute "hour" sessions (leaving 10-15 minutes for analysis and treatment planning) are common. Longer sessions are generally scheduled for families or groups than for individuals or couples.
10. "When can counseling sessions be scheduled?" Most therapists try to maintain normal ("8 to 5") office hours. However, some therapists are willing to schedule sessions during evenings or on weekends, to accommodate families with children or working couples.
11. "Is there an appointment cancellation policy?" Some therapists charge regular fees for missed appointments that are not cancelled early enough. In most cases, the therapist does not charge if a session is cancelled at least 24 hours in advance.
12. "Will the therapist be available by telephone in times

of crises?" Many but not all therapists are available for emergency phone calls or appointments. Some therapists arrange for other professionals to be available during times (e.g., vacations, holidays, etc.) when they cannot be reached.

13. "How often are counseling sessions scheduled?" One or two sessions per week is common, while in some cases sessions are scheduled every other week.

14. "What is the average length of treatment for your clients?" Length of treatment depends upon various factors, including seriousness of the problem and type of treatment selected. Generally, the more serious the problem, the more work is required to solve it. Some types of treatments take longer than others. Classical psychoanalysis could take years, while some of the more recent "brief therapies" might result in change after only a few sessions. In general, it is not uncommon for 15 to 25 sessions to be needed for changes to become significant. Note, professionals disagree on the relative merits of long-term versus brief therapies. So it is not necessarily clear that one is better than the other.

HOW CAN YOU AVOID QUACKS AND CHARLATANS?

Marriage and family therapists have their own professional ethics. A list of ethics can be obtained from the American

Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (address provided in a later section). In addition, professionals tend to follow similar procedures such that one can make some generalizations about what to expect and what not to expect in counseling. The following are warning signs that may be helpful in identifying and avoiding a nonprofessional (a quack, charlatan, or someone who does not abide by the ethics of the profession):

1. Are services advertised flamboyantly? Professional ethics restrict marriage and family therapists from listing more than their name, degree, specialization, certification, and address. Given this restriction, the consumer should be at least cautious about large displays or other advertisements making extravagant claims.
2. Are diagnoses made quickly, even over the telephone, without analysis of relevant facts?
3. Are quick or guaranteed solutions to problems offered? In most cases, a quick and easy solution is unrealistic, particularly when the clients have already tried to solve their problems without professional help.
4. Are excessive fees charged? Is the therapist vague or unclear about fees?
5. Does the therapist appear uncomfortable with requests for information regarding credentials, training, experience, etc.?
6. Does the encounter include intimate or obscene elements? Is there an exclusive focus on sex when the presenting

problem is unrelated?

7. Does the therapist insist on home visits or "house-calls"? While some professionals do offer home visits as an optional alternative, insistance on house-calls may indicate that there is no office or professional practice.

8. Does the therapist claim to have all the answers, skill, etc., and resist your request for referral to other professionals?

While the above have been found to characterize some charlatans, one or two yes answers do not necessarily indicate a charlatan. They may, instead, just indicate atypical experience. In general, the wise consumer will refuse to submit to any procedure that feels humiliating, and will not hesitate to ask questions.

In summary, one can find highly qualified and competent professional marriage and family therapists by shopping around, by requesting referrals and recommendations, and by interviewing and evaluating the qualifications, services and approaches of prospective therapists.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY.

IS MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY ONLY FOR "SICK" MARRIAGES OR FAMILIES?

The idea that "only very sick marriages and families can benefit from marriage and family counseling" is a myth. Actually, most marriages, unless made in heaven, and most families could benefit from professional help at some time. Change, stress, and "problems" can be expected in any relationship and therefore are "normal." The issue for most of us is whether we want to deal with our normal problems ourselves or seek professional guidance. We make similar decisions when our cars are not running as smoothly as we would like. The professional marriage and family therapist is also trained to strengthen families that are already healthy and happy, and thereby prevent problems from arising as well as increase the quality of family life.

DO YOU HAVE TO HAVE A "PROBLEM" TO SEEK OR BENEFIT FROM THERAPY?

You don't have to have a "problem" to seek or benefit from marriage or family therapy. Unfortunately, many families don't seek help until a great deal of damage has already been done, and the "problem" is much more serious than it need have become. Sometimes it is too late. Some of the the more serious of problems could

have been prevented if professional help had been sought early enough. Indeed, there need not be a "problem" at all. Most couples or families can strengthen their already strong and healthy relationships with professional guidance. While this can be thought of as "prevention", it can also be seen as maximizing the quality of family life.

DO YOU HAVE TO BE MARRIED TO SEEK MARRIAGE COUNSELING?

Couples need not be married to seek or benefit from counseling. Any two people who want to improve their relationship can benefit from counseling. Pre-marital counseling is increasingly popular. Indeed, some churches require pre-marital counseling before marriage. Post-marital counseling (of divorced couples who share children, extended family, friends or property) is also increasingly common. Others who are in other kinds of relationships, whether friendships or alternatives to marriage, also seek counseling to solve problems or strengthen the relationship.

DO THERAPISTS OR THEIR FAMILIES ALSO HAVE PROBLEMS?

Change, stress, and "problems" can be expected in any relationship, including that of the counselor. Indeed, some schools of therapy insist that every therapist must undergo therapy as part of training.

MUST A THERAPIST EXPERIENCE A GIVEN PROBLEM IN LIFE IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO HELP SOMEONE ELSE?

The idea that "only a counselor who has experienced the same problem can understand or help" is a myth. Professional education and training helps the counselor to understand without direct personal experience.

ARE PARENTING SKILLS INBORN?

The ability to be good parents is not inborn or instinctive. Parental love may be instinctive, but the skills needed to rear children and deal with family difficulties must be learned. Sometimes experts are needed to help parents learn how to parent.

IS THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE COUNSELING ALWAYS TO SAVE THE MARRIAGE?

The objective of marriage counseling is not always to save the marriage. Instead, objectives are defined by the clients in consultation with the therapist. Client couples usually want to improve their relationship, if not "save" their marriage. Yet some couples seek professional help after they have already decided to divorce. Marriage counselors also help people separate or negotiate the details of a divorce, if that is what the clients want. Even couples who have previously divorced sometimes seek professional

help to facilitate communications (e.g., regarding custody or visitation of children) and other aspects of relationship that still exist despite a divorce.

The goals of a couple or family often change as therapy progresses. Marriage and family counseling often seems to have two stages. Many couples or families don't seek help until their problems are severe and painful. The pain can usually be reduced and life made more tolerable in the first stage of therapy. For some couples or families that is enough; their goal has been reached, and therapy is terminated. For others a new goal is established, one of making their marriage and family relationships even better. Then the second stage of therapy begins. As family therapist Carl Whitaker puts it: "Do they want to bang on the piano or do they want to play Beethoven?" As consumers become more knowledgeable, more and more couples and families are already at this second stage of objectives when they seek the help of a marriage and family therapist. Then the goal of therapy is to enrich and improve family relationships that are already good.

WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS MIGHT THE THERAPIST ASK?

The therapist will try at the outset to identify all dimensions of the "problem," or clients' objectives, and measure their motivation to work for change. Four questions that clients can expect will be asked, and that they might think about in preparation for counseling include:

1. What goals do you have in mind and what do you hope to get out of counseling in the long run? While objectives may change as counseling progresses, the clearer clients are about goals from the start, the easier it will be to work towards them.
2. How committed are you to working on your problem? This involves not only questions about investment of time and money, but also the depth of your commitment to your spouse, marriage, and children.
3. How well do you communicate? How honestly and freely do you communicate your feelings? Communication skills are needed both to identify the problem and to solve it.
4. When was the last time you had a physical examination? Are you currently taking any medication or drugs, or are you receiving treatment for a medical problem?

ARE THERAPY SESSIONS CONFIDENTIAL?

You can expect the counselor to consider everything you say in sessions to be confidential. The only exceptions to this are situations where a child is being abused or where there is some imminent danger to human life. In such cases, the counselor is required by law to report the situation to the authorities, so that people's lives can be protected. Nevertheless, in general anything said to a therapist by spouse or child is kept in confidence unless permission is granted to discuss it.

DO THERAPISTS BECOME EMOTIONALLY INVOLVED WITH THEIR CLIENTS?

While many counselors are warm and caring, they are ethically forbidden to become sexually involved with their clients. Most counselors establish clear limits to any nonprofessional relationship (i.e., "friendship") with clients outside of the office. And when friends seek therapy, most professionals will refer them to another therapist. This helps maintain friendships and insures the clients' confidentiality and privacy.

IS IT NECESSARY FOR BOTH SPOUSES OR ALL FAMILY MEMBERS TO ATTEND SESSIONS?

What if only one family member feels a need for help? What if a spouse or other family member is uncooperative? While it may be ideal for everyone to be motivated and cooperative, it isn't necessary for therapy to be effective. Uninterested family members often get involved in the therapy later, given that there is at least one motivated person in the family.

Depending upon the situation, marriage or family therapy may take various forms: both partners may be seen together ("conjoint marital therapy"), individuals may be seen separately ("concurrent therapy"), the couple may be seen together by two therapists, usually male and female ("conjoint co-therapy"), some part or all of the family may be present ("family therapy"), and unrelated

individuals, couples or families may be put together in a group ("group therapy").

WHOSE SIDE WILL THE THERAPIST BE ON?

When couples disagree, they sometimes want an outside judge to settle things for them. In some cases this means deciding who is right and who is wrong. Sometimes it means deciding who is at fault or "to blame" for the family circumstances. Marriage and family therapists try not to take sides, except to be on the "side" of the relationship or family as a whole. Finding fault or blaming is usually destructive in the end. Instead, marriage and family therapists focus on relationships rather than individuals, even when they are counseling only one person at a time. Therapists are concerned about "what" is wrong, not "who" is wrong. In focusing on the relationship, the therapist will try to help clients understand cause and effect in the family system and the trade-offs and consequences of decisions. Counseling often involves a search for constructive and positive ways of making decisions and dealing with differences, feelings and stress.

WILL THE THERAPIST "FIX" OR CHANGE YOUR SPOUSE OR MISBEHAVING CHILD?

Therapists are not magicians or gods. They cannot "fix" a relationship, nor change a spouse or child. Instead, they help people change themselves and their relationships. Although subtle,

the distinction is important because, in therapy, the clients are learning how to control themselves and create the kind of relationships they want. To facilitate self-control and independence, most therapists help clients explore options and alternatives rather than tell clients what to do, give advice, or make decisions for clients. Clients with problems so serious that they cannot make decisions for themselves, even with professional guidance, are poor candidates for marriage and family therapy. They are usually referred elsewhere for individual psychotherapy and sometimes hospitalization.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY?

Definitive outcome research does not exist. Marriage and family therapy is not effective for everyone and for all problems. Success depends upon various factors, including couple or family motivation, determination, and willingness to work and change, as well as the counselor's knowledge and skill.

CAN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS HELP COUPLES WITH SEXUAL PROBLEMS?

Marital or other relationship problems may, but do not necessarily, have negative effects on sexual behavior. If the sexual problem is primarily a symptom of a dysfunctional love relationship, then traditional marital therapy appropriately treats

the sexual problem by treating the relationship. On the other hand, a "sexual problem" could be primary, and be having negative effects on a relationship. In this case, the traditional focus of marital therapy on the relationship would be less effective because it would be focusing on symptom rather than cause. To some extent this is "splitting hairs" because every sexual problem is a relationship problem of some sort, and relationships should be considered in any treatment of the sexual problem.

Since ten percent or more of sexual problems have a physical basis, it is important that clients be referred to an appropriate physician, to rule out a physical cause of the problem before starting behavioral or relationship sex therapy.

Human sexuality is an important part of the education of marriage and family therapists. A marriage and family therapist who does not have specialized training in sex therapy should be glad to refer clients to a qualified sex therapist.

Consumers who want to find a sex therapist on their own (i.e., without a referral), should take the same precautions suggested above for looking for a marriage and family therapist. Sex therapists are not licensed in most states, so the consumer must be on guard against inadequatly trained professionals and charlatans.

In the absence of licensure laws, consumers must rely on professionals themselves to establish standards of competence. On the national level, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) certifies sex educators, counselors and therapists on the basis of training, supervised

experience, and an examination. A marriage and family therapist should be able to refer clients to an AASECT certified sex counselor or therapist. As an alternative, consumers can write to AASECT (address provided in the next section) for a list of certified counselors and therapists practicing in their geographical area.

WHERE CAN YOU GET ADDITIONAL INFORMATION?

AAMFT, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, is the foremost professional organization in the country for marriage and family therapists. AAMFT accredits both training programs and individual marriage and family therapists. AAMFT Clinical Membership indicates certification with qualifications that meet standards of expertise that are as high or higher than those required by state licensing laws. Indeed most state marriage and family licensing laws are modeled after AAMFT standards. People can write to AAMFT for referrals to certified marriage and family therapists who practice in their geographical area. For more information or a referral, write to:

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
1717 K Street, N.W., Suite 407
Washington, D.C. 20006

NCFR, the National Council on Family Relations, is the national professional organization for family scientists (which includes educators, counselors, and researchers). It has a counseling/therapy section, and certifies family life educators. For more information, write to:

National Council on Family Relations
Fairview Community School Center
1910 West County Road B, Suite 147
St. Paul, Minnesota 55113

AASECT, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists, is the primary professional organization for sexologists. AASECT certifies sex educators, counselors and therapists, and will provide a referrals to qualified counselors and therapists in any geographical area. For more information, write to

American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors & Therapists
Eleven Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 220
Washington, D.C. 20036